

**ECHO IDAHO**

K12 Supporting Students  
with Autism

# Partnering with Families of Children with Autism to Build Understanding and Collaboration

1/15/2026

Julie Wittman, M.Ed., Ph.D., BCBA

None of the planners or presenters for this educational activity have relevant financial relationship(s) to disclose with ineligible companies whose primary business is producing, marketing, selling, re-selling, or distributing healthcare products used by or on patients.



**University of Idaho**  
School of Health and Medical Professions  
College of Education, Health and  
Human Sciences



# Learning Objectives

- To understand what Parent Engagement is and why it leads to better outcomes for Autistic students.
- To understand the Epstein Framework for 6 types of involvement and how that translates to practice – for Autistic students with an IEP.
- To understand some of the barriers and how to overcome them.

# What is Parent Involvement/Family Engagement?

- Parent Involvement – activities that involve the school and family usually with the goal of supporting academic achievement/learning outcomes.
  - School based or home based activities
- Family school partnerships refer to collaborative, family-centered home–school relationships.
- Family engagement highlights the interactive and dynamic process for parents' participation in their child's learning.

# Parent Involvement Leads to Positive Outcomes

Family involvement in schools increased student academic achievement (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

Increased student academic achievement included:

- Improved test scores
- Better grades
- Increased attendance
- Higher homework accountability
- Positive student motivation and attitudes about schoolwork (Darch, Miao, & Shippen, 2004)

# Why is Family Involvement Positive for Students with Autism?

- Greater magnitude of reduction in behavior challenges (Levy, Kim & Olive, 2006)
- Greater generalization of treatment gains (Koegel et al., 1991)
- Increased continuity in intervention programs (Bailey & Wolery, 1989)
- Improved levels of parent satisfaction (Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984)
- More effective strategies for resolving problems in school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995)

# Framework for 6 Types of Involvement (Joyce Epstein):

1. Parenting
2. Communicating
3. Volunteering
4. Learning at Home
5. Decision-Making
6. Collaborating with the Community

Gaspar, 2025

# 1. Parenting

- Help all families establish home environments to support children as students and to support learning and IEP goals
- Help schools know their families, including families' values, backgrounds, and skills
- Integrate knowledge of families at school and in practice to support consistency and collaboration across settings

# Parenting in Practice:

- Collaborate with parents to brainstorm activities for home and school that can support IEP goals and child learning
- Parent education and other workshops or training for parents on special education processes, services, and interventions (leverage Idaho Parents Unlimited (IPUL))
- Help your school special education team understand parents' views on disabilities and special education, as well as their priorities, goals, expectations, and dreams for their children

Gaspar, 2025



## 2. Communicating

- Design effective and flexible forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs, children's progress, and special education processes
- Eliminate jargon from all communications
- Take time to work with families to individualize these communications based on family preferences
- Check in with families to ensure understanding and answer questions

Gaspar, 2025

# Communicating in Practice:

- Weekly conversations with each parent (in parents' preferred format). **Even with those you don't like.**
- Share child progress and work in the school setting; provide opportunities for parents to share child activities and updates in the home setting.
- Weekly folders of special education notices and memos; translate all communications as needed.
- Eliminate jargon and annotate to support parent understanding.
- Follow up on important documents with a phone call to clarify and answer questions.

### 3. Volunteering

- Recruit and organize parent help and support for the school and for students
- Recognize family circumstances and understand their perspectives on involvement
- Give space for families to contribute to child learning outside of school-related activities
- Learn about, learn from, and acknowledge the contributions that families make to learning outside of school

Gaspar, 2025

# Volunteering in Practice:

- Parent listserv, forum, support groups, or other structure to allow for parent–parent sharing and connections (SEPTA)
- Parent ambassador or match program where parents can connect with peers or mentors one-on-one
- Weekly conversations with each parent where parents share insights and ideas with educators/school teams, including family activities, interests, personal research or knowledge-gathering, and strategies they find useful for their child

## 4. Learning at Home

- Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning
- Provide frequent, in-depth information and ideas of how to support child IEP goals in the home
- Ask families questions, learn about family values and preferences at home; work with families to incorporate these into school context

# Learning at Home in Practice:

- Information for families on the specifics of practices and strategies used by the school to support IEP goals, including in-depth explanations of particular interventions, therapies, and services.
- Ask parents to provide similar information on home activities.
- Collaborate with parents to work adapted versions of home activities into school and school activities into home. Practice together on implementing new strategies.

# 5. Decision-Making

- Include parents in school and special education decisions; develop parent leaders, advocates, and representatives in school and on the special education team
- Include all parents' voices, values, culture, and strengths in decisions, plans, instruction, student goals, and policies

# Decision Making in Practice:

- Active parent organizations, support groups, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation.
- Include parent representatives and leadership and input when making practice and policy decisions at a school, district, or broader level.
- In IEP meetings (and at all times) encourage parent advocacy and input. Prompt parent sharing and validate their expertise and role on the team. Advocate for parents to be heard and listened to.



## 6. Collaborating with the Community

- Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, IEP goals, and student learning and development
- Connect families with activities, therapies, external services, and professionals that align with their goals for their child and their individual family values and circumstances

# Collaborating with the Community in Practice:

- Information on community activities that link to child IEP goals and interests, including summer or after-school programs, extracurriculars, and external therapies and services
- Attend community events that are of interest and importance to families, including disability or cultural-specific celebrations, programming, and other activities
- Team with families to facilitate service integration between school/special education services and families' community connections (e.g., cultural, recreation, or health agencies)

Gaspar, 2025

# Overcoming Barriers to Parent Involvement

- Trust (Increase communication, do what you say you're going to do)
- Communication (Use preferred method, send positive notes not just negative)
- Time (Make time for these interactions, even when you want to avoid)
- Resources (Look for low-cost option, often time is the limitation)
- Capacity (of both the parent and the educators) (Think about PD)
- Language (Translation services)
- Transportation (Online options, although face to face is best)
- Knowledge (Workshops for Parents, books, online supports)
- National Network of Partnership Schools – great resource if you need ideas

# Key Points

- Family Involvement in their child's education results in positive outcomes for students with Autism.
- There are 6 types of involvement which can be viewed through a lens of students with Autism on an IEP.
- There are lots of different ways to increase involvement in each of these 6 categories.
- There may be some barriers to Parent Involvement that need to be overcome.

# References

- Epstein, J. L., et al., (2009). .School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, third edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. See chapter 5.
- Gaspar, C.R. and D. Sahay (2025) Expanding the concept of parent involvement to special education: Considerations for inclusivity. J. Fam Theory Rev.
- Levy, S., Kim, A-H., & Olive, M. (2006). Interventions for young children with autism: A synthesis of the literature. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 21 , 55-62
- Walker, H., Colvin, G., & Ramsey, E. (1995). *Anti-social behavior in school: Strategies and best practices*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

# References

- Koegel, R. L., Koegel, L. K., & Schreibman, L. (1991). Assessing and training parents in teaching pivotal behaviors. In R. Prinz (Ed.), *Advances in behavioral assessment of children and families* (pp. 36-52). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Darch, C., Miao, Y, & Shippen, P. (2004). A model for involving parents of children with learning and behavior problems in the schools. *Preventing School Failure*, 48. 24 – 34
- Bailey, D. B., & Wolery, M. (Eds.). (1989). *Assessing infants and preschoolers with handicaps*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Newmann, F. M., & Wehlage, G. C. (1995). *Successful school restructuring*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, School of Education.